If you want to read more about Is CONSENT COMPLICATED?, try:

- Beyond Yes or No: Consent as Sexual Process BY **RACHEL KRAMER BUSSEL**
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14 Reclaiming Touch: Rape Culture, Explicit Verbal Consent, and Body Sovereignty

BY **HAZEL/CEDAR TROOST**

WE LIVE IN A CULTURE that demands public ownership of the body. We live in a culture where rights to abortion, birth control, sex education, and bearing children (if you're low-income, a person of color, and/or disabled) are under near-constant attack. We live under the same government that conducted syphilis experiments in Tuskegee and is currently in the process of reapproving prison medical experiments. We work in the same movement with those who believe they get to choose what gender and sex another person must live as, and ourselves routinely define another person's gender by means other than asking hir.[1]

So why should sex be any different?

When we strategize about ending rape culture, we should remember that it is no more isolated a phenomenon than rape itself is. Though the form and intensity vary, any oppression you care to name works at least in part by controlling or claiming ownership of the bodies of those oppressed—slavery and the prison-industrial complex being only the most extreme examples. In this sense, rape culture works by restricting a person's control of hir body, limiting hir sense of ownership of it, and granting others a sense of entitlement to it. The only thing to distinguish rape culture from, say,

gender coercion[2] or ableism is to specify that the phenomenon primarily utilize sex and physical touch.

What if instead of basing our struggles in identity, or in individual oppressions, we based them in the way oppressions function? No matter how many years we've talked about intersectionality, we've continued to structure our resistance around common sites of oppression, inevitably centering the needs of the most privileged within any group and isolating ourselves from coalition. But if we organize around body sovereignty, we won't have only the strength of feminists behind us in challenging rape culture, nor only the strength of the sex-positive, polyamorous, and BDSM communities in fighting sex phobia, nor only fat people in fighting medically mandated eating disorders—we'll have the sum total of everyone who wants their body back. And that's most of us.

So how do we get our bodies back? With respect to rape culture, how do we get sex and touch back?

The first question, of course, is to ask ourselves: How much of our bodies do we truly own, subconsciously, legally, and socially? Do we own every inch of our skin? Do we own a six-inch bubble? What do we have to be asked permission for? Fucking? Kissing? Hugging? When we think about owning our own bodies, rather than rape culture specifically, we have to wonder: How do we distinguish between what requires consent (and when), and what doesn't? Or do you ask permission even to hug someone—every single time?

I do. Or, at least, I do my best. (It makes asking about bigger things much easier, by the way.)

I used to require that everyone do the same for me. At the 2006 Sexy Spring conference in Minneapolis, one of the safer-space rules was to ask for (and receive) explicit verbal consent for all touching, even if you knew the person in question. One had to ask without pressuring, and acceptance/refusal was about the act only, not the

person. One is not practicing explicit verbal consent when one asks for a hug with arms halfway around a person.

I decided to follow the safer-space rule rigorously for the conference. I was amazed by what happened—every hug, every kiss, every touch felt incredible, without any of the danger that comes with non-negotiated touch. I had never experienced touch like that before, not with partners, friends, or family. I had always had an extremely hard time saying no to touch that I was only marginally opposed to, and frequently I hadn't known that I didn't want it until it had been going on for a while. Practicing explicit verbal consent, I was able to decide first and then accept touch—or say no, which was much easier, because I was no longer breaking off contact and rejecting, but simply not beginning, that activity. I found there was tons of touch that I accepted, rather than wanted, even from people I really wanted to touch me—and to my surprise, I found the people I touched regularly were the same way. Explicit verbal consent (EVC), as a practice, got me much more in touch with my desires, and simultaneously much better at actually acting on them.

To those of you who no longer negotiate, or never have negotiated, consent with your partner(s): Try it. You might be surprised at how much touch you don't want but accept—or do want and don't ask for. The flip side of practicing EVC is that it desensitizes you to "no," teaching you how to ask without pressuring and ask without assuming you know the answer. Explicit verbal consent inverts the hegemonic straight paradigm—straight culture asks initiators (men) to know when their partners (women) will be willing, and to never ask but merely wait until they "know." But I see refusal as an integral part of being sexual with a person whose desires I cannot know. In fact, refusal creates comfort and is necessary for it—and so I ask for things I don't think I'm going to get. I've been amazed at how many times I've been wrong. I think that creating a space where no answer is expected—where it is clear that there

is no slippery slope between hands on your tits and hands in your pants—makes folks happy to do things they wouldn't do if they had to be on their guard. That's definitely been the case for me. And every time I've been sexual with another survivor, explicit verbal consent not only made a difference in our sex, but also made a difference in our lives.

I was also amazed in a more negative way. Friends were offended and confused when I required them to ask in order to hug me, or even when I asked them myself. Several people I didn't know particularly well pressured me to let them touch me without asking, since, as my "friends," they shouldn't have to ask. Despite how vocally touch-loving I am and how happy I was to share touch with them once they'd asked, they wrote off my requests as my not liking touch. It was frightening to be surrounded by people who told me I had no right to control my body this way, again and again.

Eventually, I'd had too many arguments and I gave up. My compromise was counterintuitive in some ways: The people I was close to had to ask me all the time, and those I was less close to had to ask about sexual touch only—and I would still ask all the time. I kept safety in the relationships in which it mattered most.

What does it mean that asserting that full control over my body was so strongly policed? It's odd to think that anyone would want to touch someone who didn't actively want that touch. Is there an essential difference between different kinds of assumptive touch? It felt eerily familiar to hear that somehow I was the offender and they the victim, or that I was "accusatory," that it wasn't ill-intentioned, and so on. Can we really draw a sharp line between sexual assault and unwanted nonsexual touch? I don't mean to claim that giving me a hug without asking is the same as groping me without asking, but I'm not at all sure that giving me a backrub without asking is better than kissing me without asking. Furthermore, to the extent that assumptive touch is integrated into

our society's symbols of closeness and friendship, it seems unrealistic to hope to challenge sexual assumptive touch—which is at the root of all nonmalicious rape[3]—without also challenging nonsexual assumptive touch.

Assumptive touch always involves some kind of map. A map of consent assigns different "difficulty levels" to different kinds of touch, à la the "base" system: Consent to one form of touch implies consent to all forms at its level or below (i.e., if groping is fine, hugging will be, too). These maps are based on relation to intimacy—they gauge not how much a person likes a particular activity, but how close that person is to the other person, how trusted by them—and as such inherently create pressure to consent "the right amount" (not too much or too little). Because maps do not allow touch to be evaluated on its own or judged for how it feels at the time, touch as a symbol of intimacy is incompatible with real ownership of sex and touch—and thus ownership of the body. Furthermore, maps of consent objectify the partner being touched in two ways: First, they erase hir power and agency as an ongoing self-determiner and co-creator of touch, reducing all hir sovereignty and control to a position on the map. Second, in mainstream American sexual cultures, maps of consent tend to be based on anatomy, and as such they reduce the partner being touched to a collection of body parts—an object—rather than a self-determiner of pleasure. In other words, any map of consent creates objects out of people, and any map of consent is fundamentally at odds with owning one's own body, touch, and desires.

Culturally speaking, *who* is drawing the map for whom also matters. A map drawn by white Christians won't account for the experiences of a black person who is sensitive to white people wanting to touch hir hair, nor a traditional Buddhist who assigns ritual significance to the head and feet. A map drawn by able nonsurvivors doesn't take into account triggers or nerve conditions. A map

drawn by cis[4] people fails utterly to predict what kinds of gendered touch (which is all touch, sexual or not) a trans person will want or accept.

What all this is building up to is: The difference between sexual and nonsexual assumptive touch lies solely within a social map of consent that is neither natural nor universal. There is no inherent or essential difference between the maps we as feminists call rape culture and the maps we accept as natural or convenient. We know that consent by association, consent by "normality," is not consent, and we know that it causes rape. We know that making touch a gauge of intimacy, rather than a pleasure in and of itself, results in objectification. In the big picture, any map of consent, no matter how "reasonable," ultimately wrests body sovereignty away from individuals and puts the ownership of our bodies in public hands.

The question then becomes: How do we stop assumptive touch? How do we get our bodies off the maps of consent? Demanding total and ongoing explicit verbal consent is incredibly effective at restoring body sovereignty—my experience, as well as my lovers', has been that its impacts extend far beyond reclaiming touch and sex, as if that weren't incredibly powerful in and of itself. But the price in social punishment is also incredibly high, and the practice itself is impossible to perfect. Nor do I think it's the only "acceptable" method we have to challenge assumptive touch. But until and unless we challenge ourselves to move deeper than sex, to own all of our bodies and to lay claim to no others, to find out what joys lie beneath the dull, accumulated numbness of hundreds of minitraumas, we will never get all of our bodies back, and rape culture can never disappear; it can only shrink. Consider this a challenge: If only for an hour, a day, a week, or a month, practice explicit verbal consent and demand it from others—and then find a way to keep that feeling. You won't regret it.

If you want to read more about IS CONSENT COMPLICATED?, try:

- Toward a Performance Model of Sex BY **THOMAS MACAULAY MILLAR**
- Beyond Yes or No: Consent as Sexual Process BY **RACHEL KRAMER BUSSEL**
- An Old Enemy in a New Outfit: How Date Rape Became Gray Rape and Why It Matters BY **LISA JERVIS**

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Yes Means YES!

VISIONS OF FEMALE SEXUAL POWER & A WORLD WITHOUT RAPE

Jaclyn Friedman & Jessica Valenti

FOREWORD BY MARGARET CHO

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Yes Means Yes
Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape

Two of the essays previously appeared on contributor blogs as blog posts and have been revised to fit the essay format: The Not-Rape Epidemic by Latoya Peterson appeared on Racialicious.com; Real Sex Education by Cara Kulwicki appeared on The Curvature.

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